

My favorite time. Bedtime at my daughter and son-in-law's home. I get to read a few bedtime stories with two of my grandsons, Everett and Easton. Before I leave the room, I have the boys fold their hands and we pray: God, please keep my mommy, daddy, my brothers, my Papa Mark and Nana Jeanne, Papa Stu and Grammy, my aunts, uncles, in your care this night. Thank you God for everything. "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

What's one of the first things you learned how to do as a child? Wasn't it to learn how to pray? "How is your relationship with God?" Maybe you'd say, Fine, fine. "Do you ever talk to God? Do you ever pray?" Oh sure. In church. Before I eat, sometimes. And when I'm in trouble. That's about it. That's enough praying, right? But God wants us to take time out of our lives to really talk to him, to have a conversation with him, to really and truly pray. How is your prayer-life with God? Today we meet a man who had an interesting prayer life, and that man was Abraham. Through our text this morning the Holy Spirit will not only encourage us to pray but remind us how to pray. We'll use this thought as our theme: Prayer Changes Things! 1) Humbly; 2) Unselfishly; 3) Boldly. Our sermon text is a continuation of the text from last week. Last Sunday we heard how the LORD came down with two of his angels disguised as travelers and dropped in on Abraham and Sarah. God stopped by to strengthen Sarah's faith in the promise that she would have a son in her old age. Once the visit was finished God and his two angels got up and started making their way to the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. You see this was the other purpose for which God had come down to earth. God said to Abraham, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know"(Genesis 18:20, 21).

Of course God didn't actually need to go down to these cities to check out what was going on. Since God is everywhere and knows all things he was well aware of what the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were up to. But by telling Abraham that he had come to investigate God reminds us that he does not act without first having gathered all the information.

Just what exactly was going on in Sodom and Gomorrah that prompted God to investigate? The answer is sin. The people of these two cities were acting in a way that was not in line with God's word. What were they doing that so disturbed God? While we could easily point out some specific sins the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were guilty of we should stress that it wasn't so much the kind of sins that was so disturbing as it was their attitude towards sin. The citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah didn't care that what they did was wrong. Such an attitude is called impenitence and can often be found in our lives as well. You see it doesn't matter whether you kill ten people, or lip off at spouse, both are detestable in God's eyes and if we don't repent of either sin we would deserve to meet the same end that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah did.

Isn't it interesting that God shared his plans with Abraham? That reminds us that we Christians are not inferior. We have an in with God as he shares his plans with us. From the Bible we Christians know that what is going to happen to the world in the end and what we can

expect after death. These are topics that those who don't read the Bible can only guess at.

Having found out that God was planning on destroying Sodom and Gomorrah Abraham began to intercede on behalf of the inhabitants of those cities. Abraham of course knew that his nephew, Lot, lived in Sodom and he did not want him or his family wiped away with the wicked. Let's see what we can learn about prayer from Abraham's petitions to God.

The first thing we learn is that although God had just let Abraham in on a secret Abraham didn't get cocky and think that he could tell God his business. Instead he approached God in humility. Abraham said, "I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes"(Genesis 18:27). Abraham based his requests on mercy, not merit. He knew that the same sinful heart that beat in people of Sodom and Gomorrah beat in his own chest. He recognized that it was only by God's grace and patience that he had not been destroyed for the many times that he had failed to obey God and trust his promises.

Perhaps we need to be reminded that prayer is a privilege, an audience with the King that we don't deserve. If we saw prayer this way we too would be humble in approaching God as Abraham was. That in turn would keep us from taking the blessings of prayer for granted thinking that it's something that God owes us. The only thing that we deserve is the same kind of punishment that Sodom and Gomorrah experienced.

Abraham's prayer is not just exemplary because it was humble; it was also unselfish. I suppose Abraham could have said, "Yeah Lord, that's a good idea to go down there and destroy those cities. They're bad news. But when you destroy them could you be careful not to scorch the land around it because it's great for grazing and I'd love to bring my flocks down there." Instead of thinking of how he could benefit from the situation Abraham was concerned for his nephew and his family, and any other believers that might be in those cities. Therefore he prayed for God to spare both cities if he should find 50 believers in them. Abraham wanted the people of those cities to experience the same grace he had experienced from God throughout his life.

In the same way our prayers too should be unselfish. The Apostle Paul said, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Timothy 2:1, 2). "Pray for everyone!" Paul says. Start with your family, the people here in church, your co-workers, friends, and yes, pray for your enemies too. Pray for your governing officials instead of complaining about them. Paul says that by praying for others you will benefit. For example when we pray that God give wisdom to our leaders won't they be better prepared to make wise decisions that profit us?

Although Abraham approached God in humility and unselfishness he wasn't timid. Even though God had said that he was planning on destroying Sodom and Gomorrah Abraham boldly asked God to reconsider. Abraham knew he could be bold because he realized that while God is just and must punish sin he is also loving and patient with sinners. He therefore appealed to God's mercy and patience so that the righteous could be spared.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about this account is that God listened to Abraham's prayer and agreed not to destroy the cities if he could find 50 believers in them. That teaches us

something important about prayer. It teaches us that God doesn't command us to pray just because it inflates his ego to have millions of people crying out to him. He invites us to pray because he promises to hear and listen to our prayers. He let's himself be overcome by the prayers of his people and takes what we have to say into consideration in the way that he rules the world! Remember that next time you hesitate to pray thinking there's no point since God is going to do whatever he wants anyway.

When you read this story, don't you think to yourself, "Why don't I pray to God this way?" Often-times, this is not the way we pray, is it. Often-times, when we pray, we don't have the boldness and confidence of Abraham. Often times, we have a "why-bother" approach to prayer. Isn't that often the case? I have some family members that are sick, that are struggling. Some of them don't believe in Jesus and are going to hell. I know I should pray for them, but really, why bother? It's not going to make much of a difference anyway, right? God will do whatever he does, whether I pray or not. Why bother?

Our country seems to be promoting immorality, more and more – we're becoming a technologically advanced version of Sodom and Gomorrah, if you think about it. I know I should pray about this to God, but why bother? It won't make a difference. It's very important for our church to grow, to find ways to reach out into the community and share the Gospel with unbelievers that live in the Villages community. But why should I pray for this –it won't matter, right? God will do whatever he chooses to do. Or what about you? If you have problems in your life that are related to health, or to finances, or to other personal things, maybe you pray to God a little about it, but really, why bother? It's not really going to matter, is it? Whatever happens, happens, whether you pray or not. Is this your approach to prayer?

Do you know who whispers "why bother" into your ear, every time you think about praying? It's the Devil. CS Lewis is a famous writer – maybe some of you have heard of him. He wrote a book called the "Screwtape Letters" – it's a series of letters from one of Satan's demons named "Screwtape." The demon was writing to the other demons, and he wrote, "Prayer is lethal to our cause." I can picture that demon saying, "We need to do everything we can to stop the Christians from praying. We need to tell them that it doesn't matter if they pray or not."

Did God answer Abraham's prayer? He did end up destroying Sodom and Gomorrah because he couldn't even find ten believers in either city but he did answer Abraham's prayer by rescuing the believers, Lot and his daughters. You could even say that God gave Abraham more than he asked for. He not only allowed Lot and his daughters to escape with their life, he allowed them to escape with their faith. Had Lot and his family continued to live in Sodom they too could have easily adopted the sinful life-style of the people around them losing their love for God. Therefore God not only gave Abraham more than he asked for, he showed that he knew what was best for the believers involved.

Someone once said, and I think it's true, that "the church has many organizers, but few agonizers, many who pay, but few who pray, many resters, but few wrestlers, many who are enterprising, but few who are interceding." Let us be bold. Let us be confident. Pray, Christian, pray!